

We Are Still Here

By: Meagan McLaughlin

March 22, 2020. Here we are today, in the days of the COVID-19 pandemic, an experience that we living through it will not soon forget. And just like other such events, it is going to transform our country, transform us as people, transform us as a family of faith. But Pastor Meagan reminds us that there is good news to be heard in our readings today. First and most important: we are still here. And God is still here.

Readings: [1 Samuel 16:1-13](#), [John 9:1-41](#)

*** Transcript ***

September 11, 2001 is a date that many of us of a certain age or older will not easily forget. I was at work, alone as it was still early, when the first reports came in. My coworker called, exclaiming in shock about the plane that had crashed into the Trade Center in Manhattan, and promised she would pack her TV into the car and be at the office in twenty minutes. Fifteen minutes later she called again, and in horror I pulled up images of the second plane hitting the tower. And again she promised to be at the office quickly with her TV in tow. Ten minutes later, she called again.

But finally she made it, and the two of us spent the greater part of the day glued to the TV, hearing the President's announcement that this was a terrorist attack, the likes of which had never been seen in this country before. People dying, flames burning, the seeming impossibility of navigating the wreckage to rescue survivors.

Over the weeks to come, I found myself shaken to the core. I was afraid of what the future held, in a way I never had been before. I felt economically vulnerable. I was horrified by the thought that my cousin, who lived in Manhattan, had run past the building a scant hour before the attack. I grieved for the loss of so many lives, the terror they had experienced in their final minutes, and the devastation for all the families who had lost loved ones that day. Nothing felt safe, or secure, or familiar anymore. Grief, anxiety, isolation, confusion.

I remember talking to my dad in the weeks after September 11th, as I struggled to find solid ground again. And he told me that he had experienced just such uncertainty, and fear, and grief, following the assassination of President Kennedy — another national event that had rattled everyone who lived through it, leaving them wondering how they would make it through. Grief, anxiety, isolation, confusion.

And here we are today, in the days of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, an experience that we living through it will not soon forget. And just like other such events, it is going to transform our country, transform us as people, transform us as a family of faith. But for now, as things are shifting minute by minute so quickly, it is hard to keep up. Many aspects of our lives may feel unrecognizable compared to what they were even last week.

So, family of faith, let us take a minute on this Sunday morning, breathe deeply, and listen to what God may be saying to each of us as we gather together for worship and prayer as a community. We can find grounding, for a few minutes at least, in the story of Samuel seeking a way forward after losing his relationship with Saul, and in the story of Jesus' encounter with the man born blind.

In our first reading today, Samuel was grieving the loss of his relationship with Saul. We are grieving right now. Grief is real, very real. We are grieving the loss of our Good Friday Cantata, in addition to grieving the loss of worshipping together in our sanctuary each Sunday and Wednesday.

ALL of us are grieving different personal losses and family losses, from vacations to concerts to sporting events and parties. We are all grieving different things in different ways. And God is with us in that. Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus. And God grieves with us, today and in the days to come. God is present, leads us forward in the journey, just as he led Samuel forward to find David. What are you grieving, at this time?

The people around the man born blind are anxious. Why did it happen? Whose fault was it? Who sinned, that God caused this man to be born blind? And then the man was healed, just like that. The community around the man born blind, we are told, when they saw him after his encounter with Jesus, did not recognize him as the man they had known their whole life. And they immediately begin once again to seek answers, seek direction. Who are you? Who did this? Is this your son? Are you sure? What happened?

Events like these shake up what we think we know and challenge our assumptions and expectations, and at times we might feel like we are not even sure who we are or what we're supposed to do. We seek answers, want to know who to blame, whose fault this situation is. I'll be honest, I have my list. How about you? What are you anxious about today? What answers are you seeking?

The man born blind had lived most of his life isolated from the community around him. He was less than, defective, other, the one who must have sinned, or whose parents must have sinned. Today, we are asked to voluntarily set ourselves physically apart, for a time. Some of us, and some of our loved ones, are in situations where they can't receive visitors, can't see the friends they spend their days with, even if they live right down the hall. Some of us, and some of our loved ones, are thrust suddenly into 24-7 community that we are struggling to navigate — even though we love our close companions dearly. Some of us are feeling the weight of not having needed space. Some of us are feeling the panic and exhaustion of not having access to energizing, renewing, physical interactions that typically fill our days.

This time of flattening the curve, of choosing to love our neighbor by maintaining sacred distance for a time, has completely disrupted our regular rhythm of life. Samuel wasn't sure what to do, once Saul was gone, until God guided him to David. The man born blind, and his parents, were cast into the focus of their community in an unexpected way after his encounter with Jesus. His parents were afraid. The man, it seems, was a little irritated at the persistence of the religious leaders, and snaps back, brilliantly, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" How are you experiencing the disruption of your community today? Are you feeling lonely? Are you craving silence and solitude that are not easily available right now? Have you, like the man born blind and transformed in his encounter with Jesus, found yourself short on patience, and long on irritation?

My family of faith, there is good news to be heard in our readings today, very good news indeed. First and most important: **we are still here**. In the midst of the transformation of the blind man, people don't seem to believe that he is actually the same person. The man himself explains the encounter he had with Jesus, and his parents claim him — "He is our son." We are still here, nonetheless. Our world is changing, and yes we are being transformed by the events of our times, but **we are still here**.

And God is still here. God was there to guide Samuel forward, in the midst of his grief, and his confusion about what to do next, without Saul at his side. God is here with us, inspiring and guiding us as we continue to be church, together. Just over a week ago, coming together for worship on Zoom was the last thing we anticipated. And yet today, here we are. Zoom Sunday School will happen at 11am. We are caring for one another, reaching out in intentional and thoughtful ways, as best we can in this time of transformation. We are physically separated, but will not be torn apart. The blind man told his questioners, “I can’t explain it, but I know this: I was blind, and now I see.” In other words, “I encountered God.” As confusing and unfamiliar as things may feel right now, we are still here, and God is still with us!

The grief, and anxiety, and loneliness, and confusion are real. Extend grace, abundantly, to one another — and to yourselves. We will come to balance again. We will be transformed by this season in ways we can’t yet anticipate, gain a clarity and grounding that right now may feel somewhat elusive. We will continue to be the church, in this space and time, and all the times and spaces to come. Thanks be to God!

*** Keywords ***

2020, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, coronavirus, 1 Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41, John 11:30-40